The memorial plaque to a Lithuania-born Catholic bishop Nicolaus Szostak was unveiled in Kerala this Sunday. The plaque, cast in white marble stone with a Latin inscription on it, was installed in the former cathedral of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and St. Joseph in Varapuzha, former Verapoly, some 20 km north-east from Kochi.

It was in this cathedral that Nicolaus Szostak had served as Vicar Apostolic for 22 years (1751-1773) and was buried after his death. Due to a devastating flood at the beginning of the 20th century the tomb has unfortunately not survived.

The Lithuanian Embassy in New Delhi has pooled efforts with the local Catholic community to recover and perpetuate the memory of a prominent Lithuanian, locally known as Bishop Florence.

Nicolaus Szostak comes from a noble family. He was born in Vilnius in 1710. At the age of sixteen, he joined the Order of Discalced Carmelites and later continued his studies in Rome. In 1739, he was sent on a mission to the Malabar Province in South India.

In 1746, Szostak was ordained as a bishop and appointed as coadjutor to the Vicar Apostolic of Malabar, with the right of succession. At that time, the ecclesiastical province of Malabar didn't have the status of a diocese and was headed by Vicar Apostolic as per church law.

In 1751, Szostak succeeded as the full-fledged Vicar Apostolic of Malabar. He held this position until his death on the 26th of July 1773.

Szostak's ministry was not easy. The local Christian community under his pastoral guidance was highly fragmented and going through a difficult period of time. The Padroado Real of the Portuguese administration was competing with the Propaganda Fide of the Roman Pope; meanwhile, the non-Catholic St. Thomas Christians were divided between the followers of the West Syrian liturgy and those observing the native rites as delivered by St. Thomas in 52 AD.

Szostak had to cope with these divisions and accommodate competing political and religious interests. In historical records he is described as "a man of great courage and bold character." Szostak always believed in finding a common language. He championed the establishment of a seminary for the followers of the Syro-Chaldean rite, and also supported the publication of their liturgical books. The Maharaja of Travancore had even tasked him with the arbitration of disputes between the rivaling Christian communities.

Despite largely unsuccessful attempts to unite these conflicting communities, Szostak did earn public recognition. History books contain a record dated 1773 wherein St. Thomas Christians arrive to the funeral of Bishop Florence and suffer humiliation by not

being allowed to enter the cathedral. The fact that the followers of a competing liturgy have taken the risk of showing up at the funeral speaks for itself.

Szostak is the only Carmelite originating from the Polish-Lithuanian province who became a bishop.

The installation of the memorial plaque has been sponsored by Lithuania's Honorary Consuls in Kolkata, Mr. Arvind Sukhani, and Bengaluru, Mr. Kiron Shah.

The memorial plaque was unveiled after the Sunday Mass with the participation of local churchgoers. A group of professional a capella singers from Lithuania also performed during the event.

https://www.urm.lt/en/news/928/memorial-plaque-to-a-lithuania-born-bishop-nicolaus-szostak-unveiled-in-kerala:32804